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Delta Scene

Fall 1977 Volume 4, No. 3

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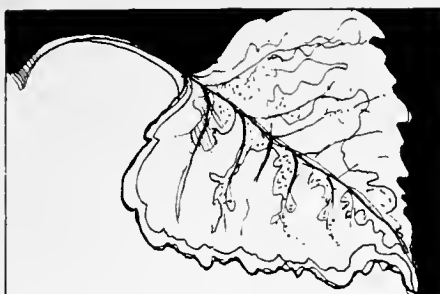
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FORUM

by Curt Lamar

Finally, the long, hot summer (literally!) has come to an end. The cicadas in July and August heralded this fact with great enthusiasm, and Deltans welcomed their raucous message.

Now the Delta prepares for a new season. Fall is that soft, golden time, a time of early morning fog, of hazy days, and of just a touch of coolness in the late afternoon and evening. And in the Delta, early autumn brings the most striking sunsets imaginable.

A Delta autumn means many things to many people. School begins again for most between five and twenty-one, as well as for some older, and although students grumble and sigh, actually they are eager to get back, to see old friends and to make new acquaintances. Many parents sigh their own relief as well! The sound of footballs being kicked fills the air, and a growing excitement becomes more noticeable as preparations for that uniquely American sports spectacle gain in intensity.

Indeed, the Delta autumn is a mellow time, a more relaxed and easy-going time in the wake of the frenzied hurry of summer. Even farmers relax just a bit, for autumn is their time to look back and assess, then to make plans for a new season, which they hope will certainly be better.

So relax with this fall issue of *Delta Scene*. Enjoy it as you enjoy the weather. And, when winter comes, with its grey dampness, *Delta Scene* will be there to make those rainy, cold days a little less dreary. Certainly *Delta Scene* is a good literary companion to have at any season in the Delta. Happy reading!

mailbox

Dear Dr. Lamar,

Enclosed is a check for \$8.50. Please enter subscription for me to *DELTA SCENE* for 3 years.

Congratulations on a fine and tasteful publication and best wishes.

C.M. Davis, Jr.
New Orleans, LA

Dear Curt,

You and your staff have done outstanding work during the past year with *DELTA SCENE*. I was particularly pleased to read in your column that it has grown so rapidly. I always knew that it was a good idea. Your staff and the support given you by Delta State University have made it a good publication.

I am enclosing a check for a year's subscription, as well as money for each of the back issues since *DSU* took charge.

Ed Phillips
Clarksdale, MS

Dear Cary,

Dr. Davis and I are strutting as proud as our peacock over the layout in the Summer '77 issue of *DELTA SCENE*. Thank you and Dr. Lamar for such generous coverage.

We are enclosing a purchase order for 75 copies of the publication at your quoted price of 50c each.

We have alerted the Commonwealth to tell their readers about the article too . . . Thanks so much again and hope to see you both soon.

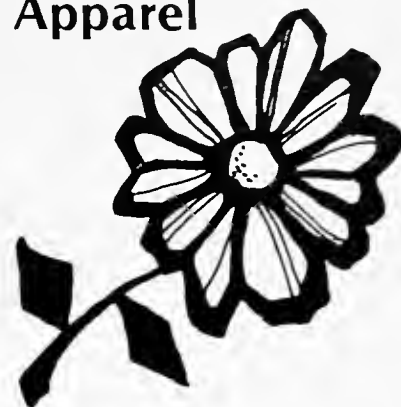
Jane Biggers
Assistant Director
Floewood Plantation

Dear Curt,

I have enjoyed this magazine very much and am very proud of your articles. You and the *DELTA SCENE* are an asset to our Delta State University.

Verner S. Holmes, M.D.
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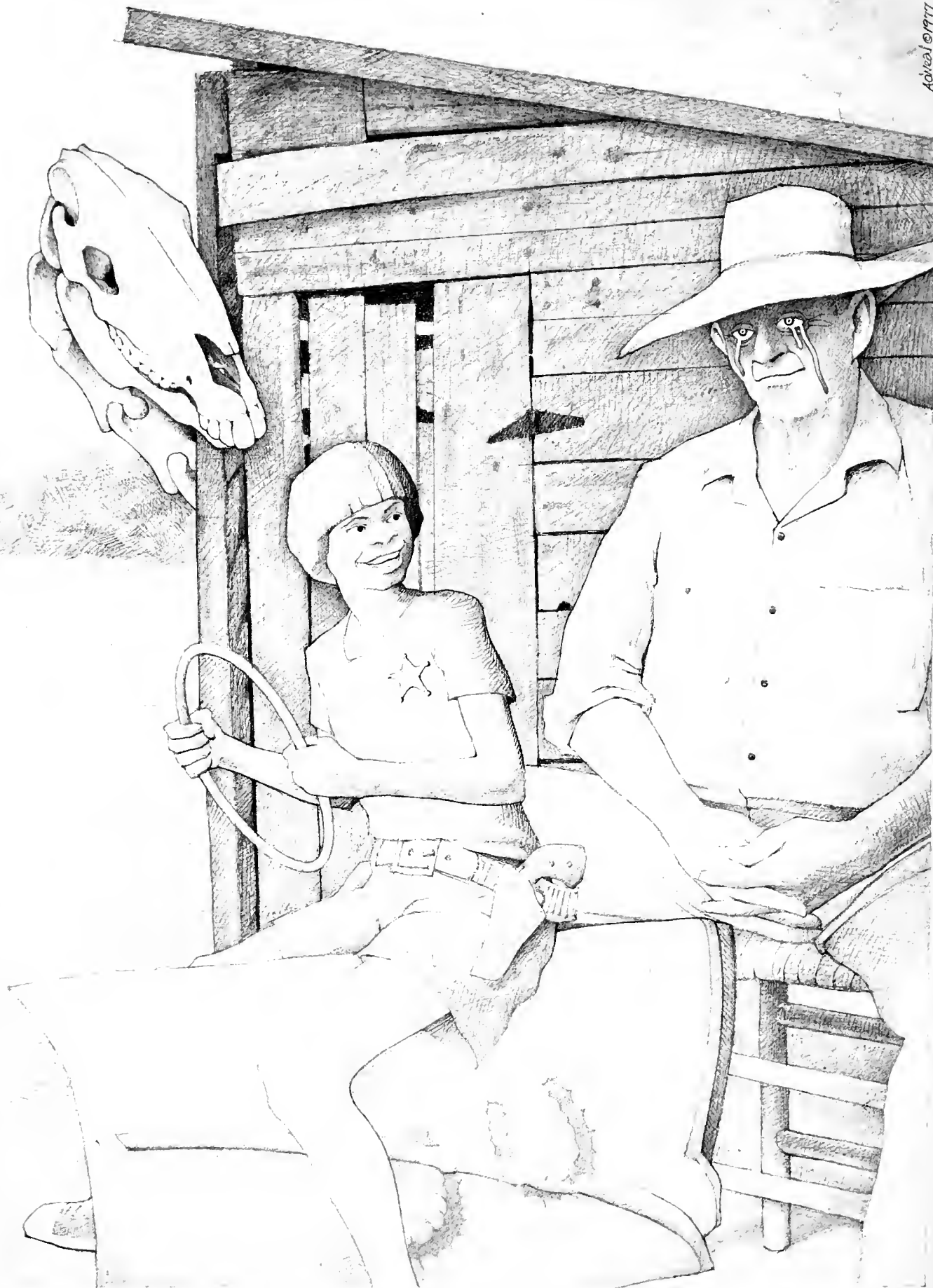
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PePaw's Pontiac

PePaw called it "that damn mule."
A dent in a new fender
Will color one's opinion
Of a misguided neuter.

As for me, I blithely planted
A crop of make believe games
Beneath the salvaged piece
Of the '54 Pontiac.

He saved that fender stubbornly
Like a battle souvenir -
A necklace made from melted shrapnel
To be worn when hating Germans.

Ah - PePaw loathed the mule
That torpedoed his new car
Ten odd years ago
When he was driving fast.

He hated it serenely,
A hate well-laced with pleasure;
And often told my mother
He was glad the mule had died.

While, I, in total ignorance
Transmuted in my play
The fender into private joys
And never damned the mule.

B.S. Mikell, III, is a native of Kosciusko, and a recent English graduate of Delta State University. He currently is attending Northeast Louisiana University in Monroe to work toward a Master's degree.

"PePaw's Pontiac" was awarded second place for poetry in the 1977 DSU literary competition. Mr. Mikell has also received numerous other awards for his literary work.

Alex O'Neal, a native of Greenville, is currently an illustration major at Rhode Island School of Design.

by Mary Jayne Whittington
For the Commonwealth

Editor's Note: We are grateful to Mr. John O. Emmerich, Publisher of the GREENWOOD COMMONWEALTH, and to Mrs. Mary Jayne Whittington for graciously allowing us to reprint the following article.

When in 1945 Ben Wasson returned to Greenville, to the state H.L. Mencken had called the desert of the beaux-arts he had published one novel and numerous poems.

He had been, both in New York and in Hollywood, the highly successful agent for William Faulkner, Dashiell Hammett, Corey Ford, Frank Sullivan and others whose names then held a sort of magic. And, in some cases, still do.

Since those days, a lot of water has gone over the levee, a lot of plays have gone over the boards, a lot of notes have gone down the horn, with Ben sometimes a participant and always a keen observer of the arts in his native state.

Last week I drove over to Greenville to talk with this legend in his lifetime who for the past few years has been on the staff of the Delta Democrat Times. I went to take a backward glance with him at the changes that have taken place in Mississippi, former orphan of the arts.

"Maybe the Arts are like Pooh Bear's song," Ben mused, "'The

more it snows the more it snows — the more it goes on snowing.' Here in Greenville, first Will Percy was encouraged to write poetry by his unpublished poet schoolteacher Miss Carrie Stern. He published three volumes and, later, his beautiful autobiography *Lanterns On The Levee*. But, meantime, Will had encouraged young Shelby Foote, David Cohn, Louise Crump and others to write. Before very long Greenville, according to the editor of *Atlantic* magazine at that time, had more published writers per capita than any place in the United States."

I looked over at the tragically beautiful head of Faulkner on the piano in Ben's living room, the first casting of a well known sculpture by Greenville artist Leon Koury, a Percy protege. My glance moved on to a framed photograph of Mr. Percy, the last taken of him and also by Koury. Poignant, a little wistful and very beautiful, it goes straight to the heart.

"The more it goes on snowing," I said, thinking of the young Mississippi artists (painter Bill Dunlap, photographer John Miller, writer Don Lee Keith among others) whom Ben gives the encouragement that came to him from Will Percy.

Ben went on, "It's so often asked, 'Why have there been so many writers in Mississippi?' It's my conjecture that, when the first settlers came, they came bringing their libraries along. They knew good literature, had it with them,

Ben Wasson takes a retrospective look at Mississippi art and literature

read it. There wasn't much else to do. They couldn't bring stereo music or televised ballet, but they had literature. This became their artistic outlet.

"For we're all mimics. Wasn't it Rochefoucauld who said, 'If no one had learned to read, very few people would be in love? I believe so. At any rate, now that we're exposed more to dance, music, theatre and the visual arts we're creating more in those art forms.'"

"Helped by the Arts Commission," I suggested.

"Yes," said Ben. "That's the other big factor in the change. Money. In the past, we couldn't afford art. We were a poor state. As with the history of mankind, survival came first. Esthetics followed. Earliest man made his cave secure. Then drew pictures on the walls later. This country was a wilderness, a frontier. Then there was the devastating war in the South. We had to look after the basic job of economic survival before we could start painting those pictures on the walls, so to speak.

"And, yes, the Arts Commission is being of tremendous help."

Ben fanned absently at a fly left behind when a neighbor had stuck her head in the door, found him occupied and left. I asked what he thinks of the general quality of art today.

"Shoddy. So shoddy. Warhol! Broadway! But this isn't altogether true. I suppose you know how superb Marie Hull's work is. And Bill Dunlap's. To name two Mississippians. And there are still discerning viewers and readers. Regrettably they are in the minority. Always have been."

Ben, who sold Hammett's *The Thin Man* to Blue Book after a number of other magazines had rejected it, attracted world-wide attention four years ago when an unpublished Faulkner manuscript was found in Oxford. The dusty pages, published later as *Flags In The Dust*, had been trimmed by Ben from Faulkner's *Sartoris* which his editors had first rejected

because of excessive length. Literary circles hummed with excitement over the discovery. Opinions, verbal and written, abounded.

We talked of old times in New York and Hollywood with Dorothy Parker, Sinclair Lewis, James Thurber, John Steinbeck, Pearl Buck. We talked of more recent times after his return to Mississippi, of his work with the Twin Cities (Greenville-Leland) Theatre Guild, of his book on Faulkner which is now in the hands of a publisher. Before leaving, I asked this distinguished gentleman what he thinks of the newest art form, television.

"Awful. Simply awful!" he said. Then he grinned. "But I never miss *As The World Turns*.' My daily fix."

Judy O'Grady, how about that?



photograph by John C. Henry

"Scott's Grocery" read the sign. It was one of those complimentary advertisement signs, with red block letters on white tin, sandwiched between big red discs advertising Coca-Cola. It stretched across the swaying porch roof and was joined in its message by two similar but smaller signs on either side of the store.

"Scott's Grocery" was misleading, though, for behind the rickety screen doors was a treasure trove of sweets and soft drinks and the best hamburgers that ever graced a griddle or a palate. Such were the attractions of "The Little Store."

That's what it was nicknamed by scores of school children in Morgan City, a Delta hamlet halfway between Colony Town and Silent Shade. Everyday every kid who was lucky enough to get a nickel for candy made the mid-morning recess pilgrimage to The Little Store from the school across the street.

Amid the cacophony of "I wants"

and "Gimmes" Mrs. Scott, the store's proprietor, would somehow determine that Curtis Hall wanted a peach soda and that Arlen wanted a moon pie and that I wanted some winding balls. I always wanted winding balls, and pretty soon, when she saw me coming, Mrs. Scott would anticipate my request and have the hard candy waiting for me when I arrived with my nickel.

Mrs. Scott was like that. Her clientele was a small, select group, and she offered them services never even thought of in posher places.

I used to take the family order for hamburgers to her — six plains and three regulars. After one or two initial orders she never again asked me what we wanted on them. She always remembered that "regular" meant everything for my mother

By Curt Guenther

LITTLE STORE IN MORGAN CITY



and everything but onions for my father, and that "plain" meant no condiments at all for my youngest brother, only mayonnaise and pickles for my other brother, and just mustard for me. She must have had a fantastic memory, because she gave the same personalized service to every family in town.

The fame of The Little Store spread through the years. Schoolboys graduated, moved away, married, and sooner or later brought their wives and children to eat Mrs. Scott's hamburgers at The Little

Store. It was almost a ritual, a solemn rite of passage from one generation to the next.

It was a survivor of the Depression era. Established by Mrs. Scott's husband, a young planter ruined by the country's economic collapse, it still wore its 1930's dress. Six naked bulbs hanging from the ceiling cast their harsh glare through the shotgun building. A lone space heater struggled to warm the occupants in winter, and in the summer Mrs. Scott would open the back door so an occasional lazy breeze could float through to dispel some of the heat.

In the back of the store was an L-shaped eating area of crudely-built counters and long wooden

benches. The benches were worn to a mellow patina from years of use. The counters were decorated with the roughly-carved initials of a thousand schoolchildren and a vase of plastic hyacinths.

The wall space was covered in old calendars and soft drink advertisements. A soft-drink tray hid behind stacks of old cigar boxes; the Coca-Cola girl's bright smile seemed out of place in the presence of the Dutch Masters' stern countenances. A blackboard above the counter where Mrs. Scott pounded her hamburgers told of prices long since raised, but never erased — hamburgers, 25 cents; hot dogs, 15 cents; cheese sandwiches, 20 cents.

The sparking white enamel of a "Little Jewel" gas stove, the old style that you had to light before each use, contrasted with the greasy brown wood of the wall behind it. Its clock's hands were frozen at five minutes after two, as though time stood still for The Little Store.

Such was not the case, though. continued on page 24

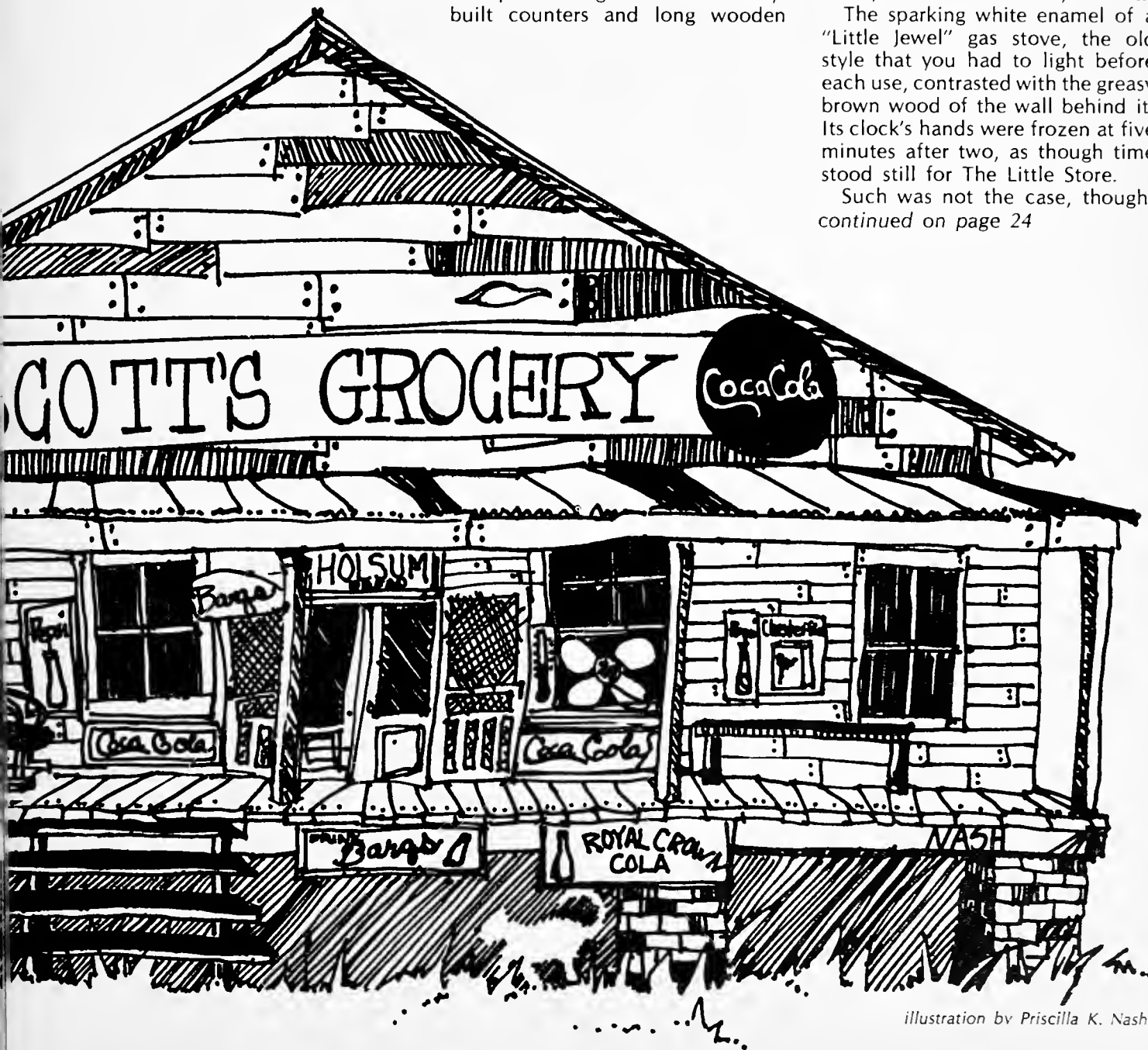


illustration by Priscilla K. Nash

BREAKING A LEG IN MISSISSIPPI



Above, the Gulfport-based Southern Educational Theatre in "Bananas."

Ask the next three people you see what in the theatre is meant by "Break a leg!" and chances are each will answer, correctly, the expression is a substitute for good luck wishes, to which thespians are superstitiously opposed. Ask the next three people you see what's an entrechat, an Immelman, or an enjambment and chances are the indifferent answer will be something like, "Haven't the foggiest."

Which is to say in Mississippi the play's the thing. Or at least a sometimes thing to the thousands who are members of the two dozen non-professional theatres in the state. Add those involved in collegiate drama departments and children's theatres and the figure is indeed impressive. Many of the theatres have representation in the umbrella organization Mississippi Theatre Association; almost all have received help of one kind and another on rainy days from the Mississippi Arts Commission, whose Executive Director Mrs. Lida Rogers has said, "When the Commission came into being a decade ago during the administration of Governor Paul Johnson, our first

survey brought to light that no person in the state was more than thirty miles from a cultural activity — a theatre, art association, symphony, whatever. But there were only three full-time professionals employed — one symphony conductor, one theatre director, one art association director. One of the missions of the Arts Commission has been to assist in upgrading quality by making professional help available through grants."

During the 1977 fiscal year, twenty grants totaling thirty-one thousand dollars have gone to theatres in the state. Arts Commission funds have been used from Oxford to Gulfport for guest artists, resident directors, guest directors, work-shops, and touring.

Through judicious use of "seed money" from the Commission, Meridian Little Theatre now has a staff of three (artistic director, tech director, and secretary) and is opening its 45th season with its fourth guest artist, Cecile Sherman, in the title role of "The Curious Savage." MLT's first guest artist was Academy Award winner Mercedes McCambridge. "The Arts Commis-



sion is playing Professor Higgins to the community theatres' Liza Doolittle," says Meridian's resident director Jimmy Pigford. "Across the state, theatres are getting more than a little 'elp from our friends in Jackson, making it possible for us to realize our potential. The Commission's impact is terrific."

Jaunty James Pigford, a witty, forever young bachelor, grew up in Meridian and returned home after a career that included parts in eight movies and thirty-four television shows. His theatre now has a membership of 2000, operates in a half-million dollar playhouse, includes a Ladies Guild of 400, Youth Theatre of 230, and a Boy Scout Explorer Thespian Troup. Customarily his dress rehearsals are attended by patients from East

Left, Yazoo Playhouse's "Romeo and Juliet." Below, "Another Part of the Forest" by Delta State.





Mississippi State Hospital, 4H Club members, and others from whom there is no other exposure to live theatre.

But every professional director cannot promise his theatre a rose garden like this one. The thorny part comes if the director expects professional standards from actors who expect the director to take into consideration they are playing roles in addition to office hours, car pools, and whatever. "The professional director is most successful where there is forbearance on both sides," says MTA Treasurer Dave Brenman, who has been active in the Greenwood Little Theatre during most of its twenty-two seasons.

This is not to say the amateur does not give a polished performance. Over and again an unbiased opinion is heard: "Celia Emmerich in Greenwood's 'Forty Carats' was better than Julie Harris." "Jane Petty and Frank Hains in New Stage's 'Virginia Woolf' surpassed the Burtons." And so on.

Who plays parts? Doctors, lawyers, merchants, schoolteachers, debutantes, anybody, everybody lit

Meridian Little Theatre Director Jimmy Pigford and guest artist Lucy Martin, star of the Edge of Night, discuss the play "The Owl and the Pussycat."

"My Fair Lady" at the Meridian Little Theatre.

by what Helen Hayes once called "the light of make believe." It's thought sometimes that community theatre stages are used as training grounds for professional theatre. "Not so," says Mrs. Marion Moor, Greenwood's first woman president in its twenty-two seasons, "We play the boards for the same reason that men climb mountains. They're there."

A season at the W.M. Whittington, Jr., Playhouse in Greenwood includes four productions. In addition, GLT customarily both brings productions in and takes its own touring. For example, its Bicentennial "1776" (produced in conjunction with Cottonlandia Museum under a grant from MAC) toured the state; its "Feiffer's People" was runner up in the Southeastern Theatre Conference's competition during the spring of '77. "Voices From Yoknapatawpha" came down from Oxford in the recent past and "Diary of a Madman" came up from New Orleans during the summer of '77. Children's Theatre work-shops are being held in the summers and each year a production is mounted for the Greenwood Arts Festival. Moreover, actors from GLT have been off and running at the drop of a casting call when films have been made in the Greenwood area (Delta Scene, Winter 76).

From the outset, Jackson's New Stage, under the direction of Ivan Rider, has had star-quality. The respect accorded its director by his counterparts around the state brings to mind a line from Moss Hart's "Light Up The Sky": "How do you say hello to the Salzburg Festival? How do you shake hands with Tchaikowsky's Fifth?" Rider's theatre plays with style everything from Euripedes to Neil Simon. His Board of Directors includes distinguished novelist/playwright Eudora Welty.

In 1977, New Stage's assistance from the Arts Commission included two grants making possible a conference/workshop with Broad-



way actress Inga Swenson and another with conductor-composer Raymond Allen. The second was on theatrical musical structure and performing techniques.

Southern Educational Theatre, under the direction of Buddy and Rita Sheffield, is receiving nationwide attention. Having toured Greenwood, Yazoo City, and other stages of the state, the Gulfport-based children's theatre is scheduled for a September appearance at Wolf Trap Farm, Virginia, cited by Beverley Sills as the finest showcase for the performing arts in America. Upcoming, too, is a six-week, nine-state tour of the Southwest and a five-week residency at the University of North Carolina, all made possible partially by grants from MAC and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Changes are in the wind for the Mississippi Theatre Association says President-elect Richard Strahan of Delta State University's Department of Speech and Drama. "We're

continued on page 26

FALL EVENTS

September 23-24

National Hunting & Fishing Display will be held at the Greenville Mall in Greenville, MS. Free to the public.

September 29-October 1

CAROUSEL will be presented at W.M. Whittington, Jr. Playhouse in Greenwood, MS. It will be at 8:00 P.M.

September 30

The Fall Fashion Show will be presented by the Greenville Mall in Greenville, MS. Free to the public.

October

Delta State University Art Department will present a Faculty Show in the Robinson-Carpenter Library in Cleveland, MS. Free to the public.

October 1-15

Glynda Bailey will present "Cotton Picking Time" at the Bank of Clarksdale in Clarksdale, MS. It will consist of her historic paintings called Miles of Memories. Free to the public.

October 2-22

The watercolor exhibit by James Josey will begin with a reception on October 2nd from 2:00 to 5:00. The exhibit is sponsored by the Greenville Art Gallery, Mainstream Mall, Greenville, MS.

October 6

A Flower Arranging Demonstration will be presented by Mrs. Elbert Nelson at the Robinson-Carpenter Library in Cleveland, MS. There will be a one dollar charge and please register in advance.

October 7-8

The Greenville Mall in Greenville, MS will present Aces Three Frisbees. This will consist of professional frisbee throwers and their demonstration. Free to the public.

October 8

Delta State University will sponsor the Homecoming Dance in Whitfield Gym on DSU's campus. For further information contact the SGA.

October 9

The Sunday Children's Concert will feature Bob McGrath, star of "Sesame Street," at 4 p.m. in the Greenville High School Auditorium in Greenville, MS. There will be a small door charge.

October 12-14

Delta Playhouse will present *Butterflies* are Free at Job Hall on the DSU campus. It will be presented at 8:00 PM with a charge of \$2.00 for adults and \$1.00 for children. Students free with I.D.

October 13

The Canton Flea Market Arts and Crafts Show will be held in Canton, MS and will include a Fall Market on the Court Square. Free to the public.

- October 18-22** A New Auto Show will be held at the Greenville Mall in Greenville, MS Free to the public.
- October 22** The Greater Greenwood Foundation for the Arts will present THE McLAIN FAMILY BAND in the City Park from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. Free to the public.
- October 24** Delta Music Association will present a Czechoslovakian Folk Ballet at 8:00 p.m. at the Greenville High School Auditorium in Greenville, MS
- October 27** Delta State University will present Dave Brubeck in concert at Walter Sillers Coliseum on DSU's campus at 8:00 p.m. Tickets will be \$4.00 in advance and \$5.00 at the door. Tickets may be purchased in the SGA office on campus. Students free with I.D.
- November** The Mississippi Art Colony Traveling Show will be on exhibit at the Robinson-Carpenter Library in Cleveland, MS. Free to the public.
- November** Holiday Parade will be held in downtown Grenada. The public is invited
- November 2** The Delta Garden Club Flower Show will be held at the home of Dr. & Mrs. S.D. Austin in Cleveland, MS. Free to the public.
- November 4-6** Friends of Library will tour Treasures of King Tutankhamen in New Orleans, LA at the Museum of Art. For further information contact the Robinson-Carpenter Library in Cleveland, MS.
- November 6-30** An exhibit by Harvey S. Harris, painter, will be held in the Wright Art Building on DSU's campus. Free to the public.
- November 9** Barbara Harback, organist, will hold an organ recital in Zeigel Auditorium at 8:00 p.m. on DSU's campus. Free to the public.
- November 11-12** An Antique Show will be presented by the Greenville Mall in Greenville, MS. This will be held in the Civic Center and will be free to the public.
- November 14** Sheila Simpson, pianist, will hold a concert in the Greenwood High School Auditorium at 8:00 p.m. The event will be sponsored by the Greenwood Community Concerts.
- November 16-18** Delta Playhouse will present *Picnic* at Job Hall on the DSU campus at 8:00 p.m. The charge is \$2.00 for adults and \$1.00 for children. Students will be free with I.D.
- November 17-19** Greenville Symphony Orchestra will present "Cabaret" featuring guest conductor, Dr. Sidney McKay, with Kenneth Haxton producing and directing. It will be held in the Greenville High School Auditorium in Greenville, MS.
- November 19** Greenwood Little Theatre will present FINISHING TOUCHES at W.M. Whittington, Jr. Playhouse in Greenwood, MS at 8:00.

illustration by Jill W. Stowe



Having twisted the wire into the main body of the tree, George takes torch in hand, and one by one the leaves of the tree take shape.



George Ferguson runs an interesting business in Greenville, Mississippi, and his business is his hobby. George is the sole talent behind "By George!" handcrafted gift products. One of his best-selling items is the "By George!" tree which he starts to make by twisting a small bundle of wire.

By GEORGE!



Intent on his work, George skillfully places each leaf on a branch of the tree with the heat of the torch.

byGEORGE

photo essay by David Merideth

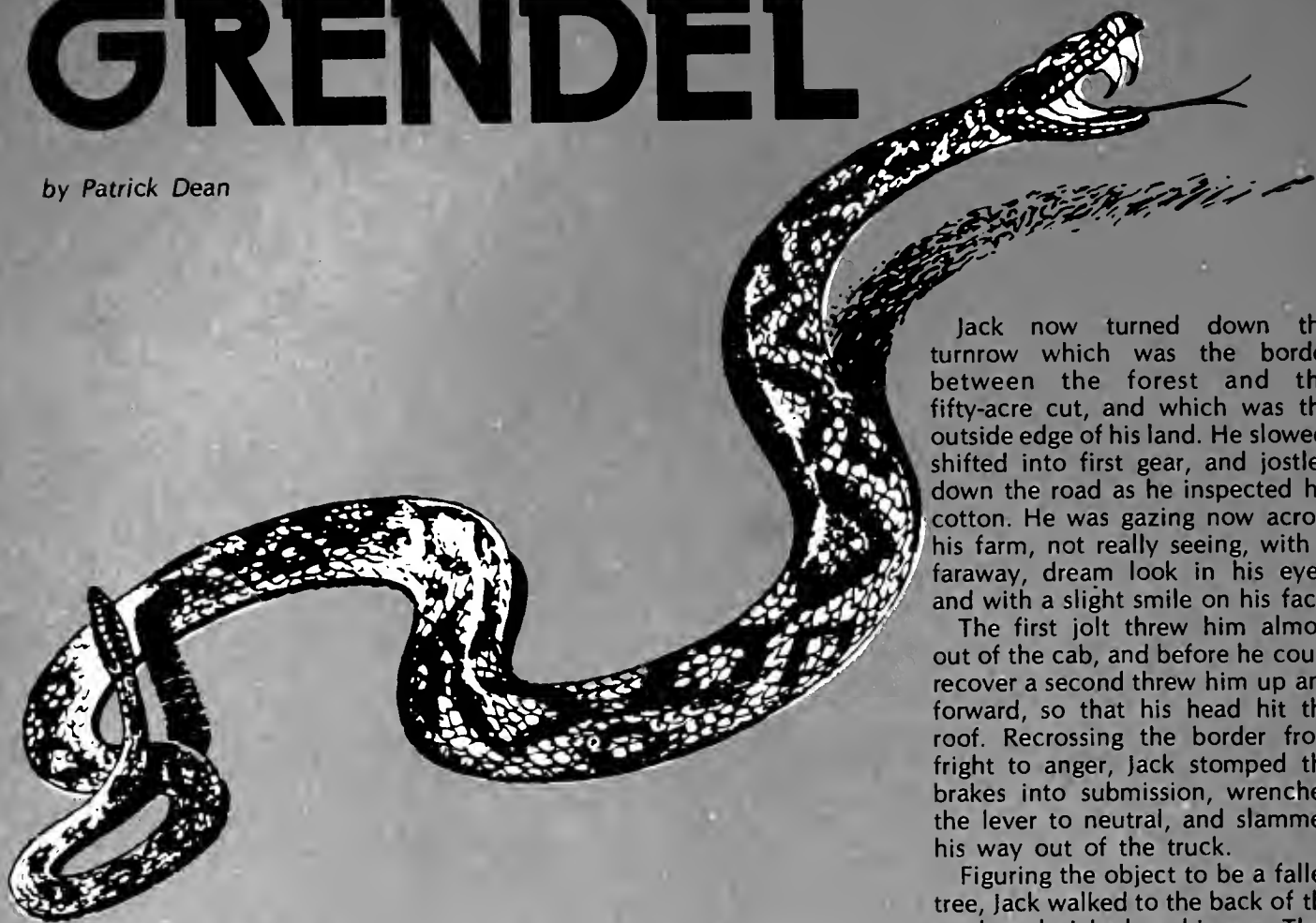


After a little time and a lot of skill and creativity, a "By George!" product is ready for market. The tree is just one of many of the original handicrafts made by George Ferguson.

David Merideth, of Greenville, is currently a student at the University of Mississippi.

GRENDDEL

by Patrick Dean



Jack now turned down the turnrow which was the border between the forest and the fifty-acre cut, and which was the outside edge of his land. He slowed, shifted into first gear, and jostled down the road as he inspected his cotton. He was gazing now across his farm, not really seeing, with a faraway, dream look in his eyes, and with a slight smile on his face.

The first jolt threw him almost out of the cab, and before he could recover a second threw him up and forward, so that his head hit the roof. Recrossing the border from fright to anger, Jack stomped the brakes into submission, wrenched the lever to neutral, and slammed his way out of the truck.

Figuring the object to be a fallen tree, Jack walked to the back of the truck and picked up his axe. Then he walked toward the thing in the road, not even looking at it. Ten feet away, he did look. Then he froze.

There, twenty feet of terrific arrested motion lay across the road; it was a foot thick. It lay still, its great length writhing in restless energy and with a malice. Neither end was visible, but the death-dark brown trunk with hideous olive and black markings revealed the nature of the monster. Rattlesnake!

Jack Thane stood there, too paralyzed to feel terror. But as he stood, a change came over him. As the mind of the Delta farmer was slowly suppressed, by surges his heart, his Saxon heart, and the souls of his Saxon fathers prevailed. Now he began to shake, and his eyes glazed over and flamed as primitive war-lust overwhelmed him. Then it was total, and a snarl came to his lips as he stared at the monster.


And, even as the thing coiled to strike, the Saxon savage screamed an other-worldly cry and sprang at the monster, battle-axe in hand.

Fall was asking permission, like a timid child, to begin. Indian summer had faded, as eternally ephemeral as its namesake. Jack Thane bumped along in his Model A Ford truck, trying to miss the ruts — endless twin parallel canyons in the dry dirt road. Doves exploded from nearby thickets in impossible patterns into the blank, windless sky, and their mutilated fluttering left only silence, broken only by truck noises.

Jack Thane was a huge, broad-shouldered man, with blonde hair and cold blue eyes. Although he

was fairly uneducated, Jack had a naturally alert, awake mind. Jack owned, worked, and lived on one thousand acres of farmland and forest. The nearest "civilized" area was Mosquito, Mississippi, a town with a population of "'bout twenty-seven" which was on land so flat that Jack would say, laughing, "if it weren't for the trees, you'd be able t'see t'Memphis, a hunnert miles away." The forest was uncleared, undrained, unchanged for hundreds of years. Jack seldom got to the woodland. It was mysterious and foreboding, a thick tangle of vines and cypress, gum, and oak trees. Slivers of sunlight like frozen lightning knifed their way in, only deepening the surrounding, primeval gloom.

The cotton was waist-high this fall, and Jack Thane had some of the best in the county. Some of it, that which Jack called the "forest cut," being bordered by the brooding woods on three sides, was five feet tall.



finality in mississippi

by Rosemary Stephens

*When I am dead and over me
Kudzu vines sprawl,
I shall welcome their winding proof
That I'm not dead at all*

*But sleeping peacefully inside
My cotton-lined coffin,
Wrapped by plaited leafy ropes
I've seen so often*

*Obliterating Delta fences,
Blending field and tree,
Warming cold angular shapes
As they finally warm me.*

Rosemary Stephens lives in Memphis where she writes poetry, fiction, and criticism for national magazines. Her first collection of poems, *EVE'S NAVEL*, was published in 1976 and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry. She holds the Ph.D. degree from the University of Mississippi and has taught in several universities.

History in Aberdeen

by Suzanne Myrick

Sun slanting through high windows lights the muted colors of 19th-century books in Aberdeen's Evans Memorial Library historical museum. A treadle sewing machine stands against one wall of the spacious room; an impressive collection of family Bibles fills several shelves.

And on top of a cabinet, next to a biography of Jefferson Davis, stands a small medicine bottle containing a suspicious-looking membrane suspended in yellow fluid.

"It's one of our donations — a little boy's appendix," Miss Lucille Peacock, Aberdeen's unofficial historian, confirmed. "After all, it is part of history."

Miss Peacock, a tiny, spry woman somewhere in her 70's, retired from her job with the library after 38 years in 1970. But she still may be found in the historical wing almost every day — accepting a dog's jawbone or a bleached cow skull from a small child impressed with its value as an artifact, or helping visitors from 31 states do genealogical research among the library's extensive county records.

In her free moments, she tells tales of Aberdeen's past, associating an event or a person with almost all of the town's older buildings or points of interest.

A favorite story is of Mrs. Needham Whitfield, whose neatly whitewashed mausoleum stands with an air of authority among the crumbling brick crypts in Aber-

deen's Old Cemetery. A strong-willed woman, the 61-year-old matron was buried in 1854 sitting in her favorite rocking chair with her unfinished knitting in her hands.

Another tale concerns the Tiffany stained glass windows in Aberdeen's First Methodist Church. The windows in the 1912 church, appraised 10 years ago at \$150,000, are among the city's treasures.

"I'm not a native of Aberdeen," Miss Peacock said, "so I can talk about it."

She remembers moving as a young woman to the east Mississippi town from Clarksdale after the great flood of 1927. "We sat on the levee for 10 days with the Mississippi raging on one side and the White River roaring on the other," she recalled, "and all we could do was watch the airplanes overhead."

Vowing to "move to the hills" when it was all over, her father bought the farm outside Aberdeen where Miss Peacock still lives, alone now with her cat.

She came by her interest in history early. "When I was a little girl in Demopolis, Alabama," Miss Peacock recalled, "reporters used to come around to see my grandfather, because he had ridden with Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest during the War."

"I remember he used to tell them how Gen. Forrest once brought his mother to the camp. Forrest was just like a little boy around Mama." Laughing, she added, "But to everyone else, he was the big man."

Forrest himself has "tenuous connections" with Aberdeen, she

concluded. "His brother, Col. Jeffries Forrest, was killed near here in the battle of Okolona," and buried in Odd Fellow's Rest Cemetery.

For nearly 50 years, Miss Peacock's life has been wrapped up in the heritage of the small city on the eastern edge of the cotton prairie. She pointed out yellowed photographs of Robert Gordon, the Indian trader who founded Aberdeen in 1836.

"He wanted to call the town Dundee," she said, but he was frustrated by the inability of the settlers from North Carolina, Virginia, and Georgia to pronounce it to suit his Scottish tongue.

The city's most revered figure was Major S.A. Jonas, founder and editor of the *Aberdeen Examiner* from 1866 to 1915, and author of the sentimental poem "Lines on the Back of a Confederate Note."

"The poem was quoted in 'Gone With the Wind,'" Miss Peacock said

proudly. "Did you ever read it?"

The United Daughters of the Confederacy erected a memorial to Jonas in 1920 at the head of the city parkway, "but somebody got the nutty idea that it was a traffic hazard," Miss Peacock said.

The monument was removed to the outskirts of the Odd Fellow's Rest Cemetery, "where nobody ever sees it."

"A traffic hazard," she added, a tinge of outrage in her voice. "People need something to slow them down."

Though she may follow her own advice to slow down when behind the wheel of "Queen Elizabeth," her blue 1950 Ford two-door sedan, Miss Peacock remains active at the library.

"We started the museum in 1932 with five arrowheads in a room above the City Hall," she recalled, "and we're always on the lookout for new things."

Some of the "new things" acquired over 45 years include a wide leather strap once used to beat Parchman convicts, sheafs of old sheet music, and stacks of account books from many Aberdeen businesses, now used to trace ancestors.

"You can find just about anybody who ever lived in Aberdeen in these

books," she said. "Of course, you may find out he didn't pay his bills."

Many items are reminiscent of Aberdeen's status in the 1850's as a city of culture and wealth where many cotton planters kept town-houses. A book inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and carvings from the Victorian gingerbread opera house ("I remember the cold, cold night it burned in 1940," Miss Peacock said) attest to the prosperous years before the Mobile and Ohio Railroad bypassed the town in the late 1850's and cut off much of its trade.

In addition to the memorabilia, Miss Peacock also solicits funds for the museum with an unconscious flair born of 45 years' experience.

"A Harvard professor walked in

here one day," she recalled. "I didn't know him from Adam's housecat." But she helped him with some research, and then kept up a "hot correspondence" with him until he died more than a year ago.

"Imagine how surprised we were," Miss Peacock continued, "when his estate was settled and we got check for \$5,000."

A local woman who had donated many family items to the Evans Memorial museum through the years also remembered it in her will, leaving it her house and a 60-acre farm. "We rent it," Miss Peacock said.

"We're just a little place, but we've got a lot of history," she added. "You've got to advertise or nobody will know."

A male voice came indistinctly from the back room. Miss Peacock rose to answer it. "Excuse me now," she said, "but I've got to help this gentleman from Indiana."

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Continued from page 11

The school across the street fell victim to consolidation, and the schoolchildren no longer clamored for root beer and red hots. Mrs. Scott's husband suffered a stroke and required constant attention. She found it hard to mind the store and care for him, too; but she had to, for the store was then their only source of livelihood.

Through the years Morgan City, too, felt the effects of change. Families moved away to bigger towns and to better jobs. Children finished school and moved away to work, never to return home to live. Change swirled around The Little Store, but it clung to its former lifestyle. Every Saturday night just about dusk folks would start trickling into The Little Store. On a good night all the benches would be taken and men would sit balancing on soft drink cases and stand leaning against the walls or the cold drink box. They would discuss the crops and politics, while the women would retell and rehear the latest rumors and marvel at how much a new arrival looked like "Cud'n" Josie or Uncle Walter. The children played "Piggy wants a signal" and "Kick the can" outside, oblivious to the mosquitoes or the cold, until summoned inside to eat.

On that night of the week the halcyon days of The Little Store were recreated in all their small-town splendor. The gaiety, the games, the gossip, the common fellowship of everyday people in an everyday place created a feeling of warmth and security. It was a good feeling, a good time, a good place.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Though not a part of the original story, an interesting sidelight, albeit tragic and sad, is that The Little Store was destroyed in the tornado of February, 1971. Mrs. Scott did not rebuild. The loss is not hers alone, but the Delta's, too. CCG

Charles Curtis (Curt) Guenther, Jr., a native of Morgan City, currently resides in Indianola. He recently joined the staff of Mississippi Delta Junior College in Moorhead as Public Relations Director. Mr. Guenther received his B.A. degree in political science from Mississippi State University and his M.A. degree in journalism from the University of Mississippi.

Questionnaire

From time to time we will be inserting a questionnaire such as the one below to enable us to better acquaint ourselves with the readers of DELTA SCENE. Please take a minute of your time and fill in the questionnaire below.

Thank you
Cary Thomas Cefalu
Managing Editor

ALL INFORMATION WILL BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL

1. Where did you buy this issue of DELTA SCENE?

- ☐ Subscriber
☐ Newstand
☐ Other

2. How often do you buy DELTA SCENE?

- ☐ Regularly (4 issues a year)
☐ Occasionally (2-3 issues a year)
☐ Seldom (1 issue a year)

3. How long have you been reading DELTA SCENE?
_____ years, _____ months.

4. What other magazines do you read regularly?

5. What is your age?

6. Are you:

- ☐ Single
☐ Married
☐ Widowed

☐ Divorced or Separated?

If married, number of years married:
_____ years _____ months

7. A. If single, do you live:

- ☐ with parents
☐ in your own apartment
☐ in your own house
Do you: ☐ own or ☐ rent

B. If married, do you live:

- ☐ in an apartment
☐ in a house
Do you: ☐ own or ☐ rent

8. Do you have any children?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

If so, age of children: _____

9. Education (Please check level completed.):

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Graduate School | <input type="checkbox"/> Self | <input type="checkbox"/> Spouse if married |
| College Graduate | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Partial College | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
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| Other (business, art, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

10. At the present time, do you:

- ☐ Keep house
☐ Go to school
☐ Work full-time
☐ Work part-time
☐ Other

If you have a job, what is your occupation?

If married, what is your spouse's occupation?

11. What is your total family income?

- ☐ Under \$5,000.
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12. Please list any ideas you have for improving DELTA SCENE.

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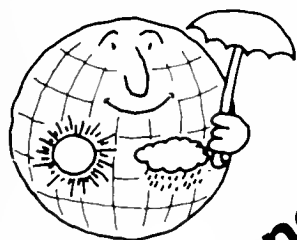
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continued from page 15
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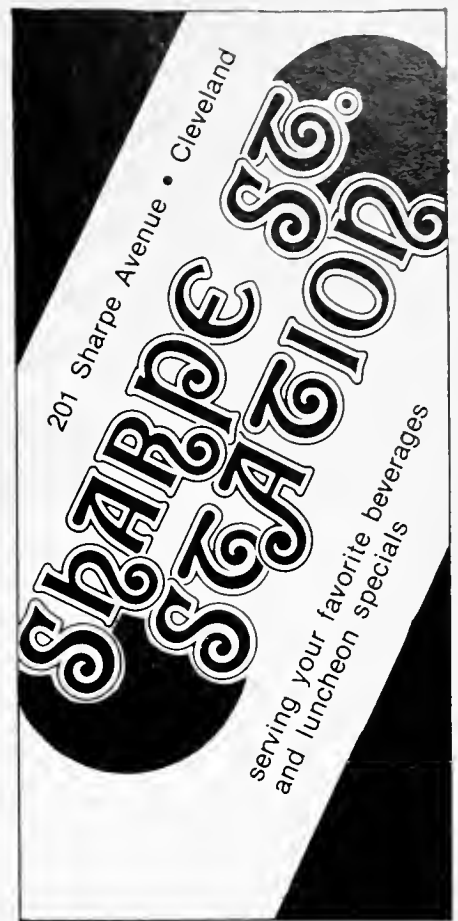
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Mary Jayne Whittington currently resides in Greenwood, where she is a free lance writer and contributor to numerous publications.

In front of Greenwood Little Theatre's playhouse: (from left) Mrs. Marion Moor, president; Robert Dilatush, MTA president; Mrs. John Emmerich, Board member, actor, director.



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**Need an
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for a
Friend?**

Or a Debtor in Savannah

by Ben Pryor

"Sarah," my grandfather called.
"Sally!"

He'd always used them interchangeably, the name and the pet name, and now Grandma came waddling. She was twenty years younger than her husband, but her own infirmities were beginning to show. She was good and kind, but imponderably self-conscious of it. Generally she contrived to hide her great well of affection behind a facade of sternness.

"Well," she seemed to snap when she was beside him. "What is it?"

My grandfather tugged the cuffs of his shirt sleeves from his smoking jacket, positioned his arms for inspection.

"Are my cuff links showing?" he asked.

"Will! Did you call me in here to ask if your cuff links are showing?"

"Well, are they?"

"Yes," she snapped again. "Your cuff links are showing."

She fretted and fumed some more, then mellowed.

"You look real good, Daddy," she said. "Real good."

And so he did. It had never been easy to choose gifts for a man close on his hundredth year, so the finery came right along with the after-shave lotions and the cartons of Luckies. There were splendid robes and silk ties and monogrammed shirts. And cuff links of course.

They weren't wasted tokens. He delighted, even regaled, in them, and now he sat before the space heater in his son-in-law's farmhouse like a manor lord before an open hearth. He was near-elegant in his

antiquity, a handsome little man with a stillfull mane of snow white hair. Sometimes strangers would even say he was pretty.

He's been gone almost two decades now, and I think of him often. I thought of him the other day when I read a line from Alex Haley:

"In all of us there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage — to know who we are and where we have come from."

I thought too of how little we know of such things in my family. Oh, we've tried now and then to learn more, but for the most part our probings have been fitful and shallow. To me the results are remarkable at all only for the simple arithmetic that so quickly overwhelms with distaff names: Daniel, Easterwood, Wofford, Harrison, Stewart, Lawler, and others.

They're all British-origin for sure, but aside from that they're untelling names. They could be the names of Confederate colonels and of Tidewater cavaliers. But they're also names common among Southern yeomanry — those simple folk who toiled the land with their own hands and backs; who were honest for the most part, but who also poached sometimes, and made moonshine.

Now and then the names of my forebears are embellished with dates of birth and death. But they're faceless names, without body and



texture.

So, again I think of my grandfather, the only one I ever knew.

We almost missed each other, and actuarial tables reckon we should have. As it was our lives coincided for seventeen years.

By count of begottens we were only two generations removed, but that's misleading. He was already an old man when my mother was born. Truly ancient by my time.

He was never a companion. He never tossed a ball, certainly was never a fishing mate. When I was very little and unknowing, he was merely a curiosity, often barricaded then (before his eyesight faltered altogether) behind his newspaper. The years have made the picture a lambent memory: my grandfather holding the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* half-inches from his eyes, for hours, till surely the eyes and old arms must have ached from it.

The affection that came in time was learned. I was taught, simply, to respect elders in general, this old

man in particular. I learned by watching the deference of others to him.

But it was a substantive affection at that, and it well survived some trials. Like the many times when I had become a teenager he would ask my name again.

"Benny?" He would always repeat the name, bewildered, trying to sort it from all the others.

"And whose boy'd you say you were?"

And he'd repeat my mother's name, too, when I told him.

"Lucille," he'd say, and settle in his chair with satisfaction, perhaps forgetting again his grandson, but savoring some distant, favored memory of his daughter.

His life, when finally it was done, would miss the century mark by a year and some days. It always seemed incredible to me, but he could remember when his own

father came home from "the" War. His adolescence and early youth were fashioned by Reconstruction — and by the worn out land of Mississippi's red hill country.

He must have wanted to escape the drudgery. Hopes of it surely went with him to the old normal school in Meridian — but it was not to be. He got for his efforts some stature among his neighbors perhaps; some supplemental income no doubt; and tenuous claim in his own family for erudition. He would teach school, but in the winters, between stingy harvests and times to plant again.

There would be notes of irony when at last he escaped those hills. A part of it would be that by then he was already beyond middle age. Another part may not seem ironic at all to many Southern whites — for it was not uncommon what my grandfather did. He sold his own fields to work in other men's. It recalls a legacy of convoluting struggles — local, generic, uniquely Southern. He took his family to the fertile flood plain of northwest Mississippi, and to its great fields of cotton — that sometimes most demanding of all harvests, often demeaning. My grandfather be-

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came a sharecropper for a while. A grandson reflects on the word and all its nuances, and winces.

He spoke of his lifetime in his last years, in monologues to himself, his own captive audience in his own straightened world of senility. It must have been a lonely world, so I think he wouldn't have minded if he had known I sometimes eaves-dropped. Sometimes he spoke of the sorrows, of the deaths of his first wife and three of his children. Now and then he remembered some mischief and would laugh out loud, giggle even, so that he would seem foolish unless you loved him. Often he betrayed the scars and pre-judices of his near-century. He remembered some "niggers" — patronizingly for sure, but often with fondness. He spoke of Yankees, always with wrath. A Methodist — the fundamentalist hillcountry kind — he once announced that "papists" would burn forever in hell.

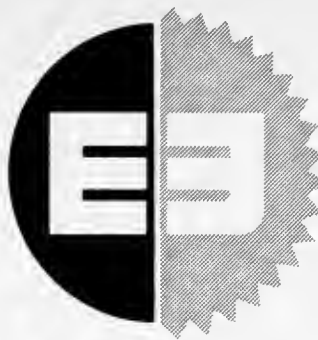
Except in our family, he was not a remarkable man. He might even have been one of Senator Bilbo's "peckerwoods." But he lived longer than the odds makers would bet, and in doing it he gave face and substance to a big hunk of my heritage. Archives offer other dimensions of it — but I'll not find that special taste of it in any of them.

He died on the eve of another cataclysm — and then gentle metamorphoses — in his Southland. I think he would have appreciated a lesson his grandson would learn. He may have been bemused to know that he shared in its teaching with a black man from Tennessee: Not to despair if someday's search brings the grandson head on with an indentured ancestor in Charleston's harbor. Or a debtor in Savannah.

Ben Pryor resides in Webb, Mississippi, and is a free lance writer and syndicated journalist. Mr. Pryor received his B.A. degree in history and political science from Mississippi State University and has studied Business Administration at the Graduate Level at Delta State University.

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OUR INTEREST IS PERSONAL



Besides the steady interest we pay on savings, we take a personal interest in each and every customer no matter how large or small the account. So if you are not getting that personal interest from your Banker, better see us today.

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